

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

THE BATTLE FOR IDEAS
IN AFGHANISTAN COUNTER-INSURGENCY OPERATIONS: APPLYING A
CORPORATE CHANGE MESSAGE FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESS

by

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Biography

A former enlisted man, Lt Col Vitale began his career as a commissioned officer in 1988 as a C-130 navigator. While assigned to Little Rock AFB and Moody AFB, he enjoyed deployments to various Operations in the Middle East, and various spots in South America, Central America, Africa, and Asia. After a stint as an instructor at the USAF C-130 Weapons School, Lt Col Vitale attended Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, in 2000. Lt Col Vitale then braved a tour in Hawaii, where he served on the PACOM staff in the J5 Regional Strategy and Policy shop. Upon leaving PACOM he entered a Doctoral program at Auburn University where he earned a PhD in Management. Lt Col Vitale's PhD research interests include organizational analysis and change, influence in organizations, and research methods. He is attending AWC following a two year assignment as a Professor at the Air Force Institute of Technology, Wright-Patterson AFB.

Abstract

Victory against the insurgent forces in Afghanistan will require the persuasion of the indigenous population of the nation. Recognizing the reality that the Afghan people will decide who wins the war, coalition forces are embarked on a mission of population protection. Winning the battle for perception requires credible and empathetic communication to produce concrete effects on the battlefield. This battle for the hearts and minds of disaffected individuals in COIN operations parallels the efforts of senior leadership to institute organizational change in a corporate setting. In both the COIN and corporate worlds, successful change implementation requires effective communication with those individuals targeted by a planned change. The DAPVE change message model introduced here is a prescriptive framework for persuasive communication used with great success in the corporate world to implement planned change. Analyzing change recipient feedback through the lens of this framework enables change agents to focus communication and substantive efforts on the components needing the most attention. The flexible nature of this framework allows for the nesting of the message content across the strategic, operational, and tactical spectrum. Further development of the DAPVE change message framework will assist us in winning the critical strategic communication battle in Afghanistan.

Introduction

“Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy.”

-Sun Tzu¹

In an insurgency, power stems from the population; without their support neither the insurgent nor the counterinsurgent can win.² Clausewitz described a center of gravity (COG) as "the point against which all the energies should be directed."³ According to Clausewitz, counterinsurgent forces should apply all energies toward gaining and preserving the support of the population that is the COG. It follows that gaining buy-in from the disaffected populations in Afghanistan is necessary for the success of the counter-insurgency operations (COIN) in Operation Enduring Freedom. Recognizing this truth in his latest guidance to coalition forces, General Stanley McChrystal, the Commander of International Security Forces for Afghanistan (ISAF) stipulated, “The Afghan people will decide who wins this war.”⁴ As the Afghan people choose the victors, they will do so based on their attitudes and beliefs regarding their comparative perceived futures. Though General McChrystal spoke in pluralities, the decision to accept or reject change is personal. Each change recipient’s attitude toward a change is influenced by experiencing or anticipating different consequences of established behaviors or by changing ideals or needs.⁵ It is the task of the proponents of change to fill the void of uncertainty regarding the outcome of change. The current competition between ISAF and insurgents to fill this void and gain influence is at the heart of victory for either side. Ultimately, each Afghan will decide which alternative future to support.

The battle to win the hearts and minds of disaffected individuals in COIN operations parallels the effort of senior leadership to institute organizational change in a corporate setting. Increasing competition in the global business environment requires organizations to change continuously, just to survive.⁶ Moreover, as is the case with military forces, technology alone does not grant victory. To be successful, those individuals affected by a change within an organization (heretofore referred to as “change recipients”) must adopt the change. In both the COIN and corporate worlds, successful change implementation requires empathetic communication with those individuals targeted by a planned change. General McChrystal has now defined victory as the persuasion of the Afghan population,⁷ yet coalition forces are currently given few communication tools with which to fight this war of ideas. The present research offers a framework, adapted from the organizational change management literature, for drafting change messages to influence target audiences. This messaging framework may be employed at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The narrative can vary in specificity, enables thematic consistency and is adaptable to local conditions. Gaining and maintaining the support and will of the population in Afghanistan is a necessary condition for defeating the insurgency.⁸ The present research argues that adapting a theoretically-derived and empirically supported message framework to COIN information operations (IO) will increase the coalition force’s strategic and tactical communication competency, thereby increasing our chances of victory.

The Change Message Framework

“In this environment, the old adage that ‘A lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has its boots on’ becomes doubly true with today’s technologies...the longer it takes to put a strategic communication framework into place, the more we can be certain that the vacuum will be filled by the enemy and by news informers that most assuredly will not paint an accurate picture of what is actually taking place.”

- Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense⁹

The DAPVE change message model introduced here is a prescriptive framework for persuasive communication used with great success in the corporate world to implement planned change.¹⁰ It is structured to address the issues which are most important to change recipients as they react to organizational change.¹¹ There are five principle components: *Discrepancy*, *Appropriateness*, *Principle Support*, *Valence*, and *Efficacy*. The DAPVE provides a framework for narrative development that is consistent with COIN IO objectives to set and shape conditions for success.¹² The present article argues that the DAPVE model's historical success in the corporate world suggests its use as a message development tool for counter-insurgency operations would also be successful. While the environments of the corporate world and COIN certainly differ, both require effective communication with affected individuals such that the DAPVE framework enables, to successfully implement change. Furthermore, employment of the DAPVE framework forces introspection and understanding of target audiences at all levels (strategic, operational, tactical, global, and domestic). This empathetic communication with change recipients is critical for winning COIN efforts.

Following a brief description of the DAPVE change message model that is the cornerstone of this study, the case is argued for its adoption and implementation in current Afghanistan COIN operations. First, the theoretical underpinnings and practical use of the DAPVE framework in the corporate world are reviewed. Second, the ongoing battle for perceptions in Afghanistan is discussed, followed by an argument for the relevance of the DAPVE framework to COIN operations. Finally, considerations for employment of the DAPVE framework in strategic, operational, and tactical COIN environments are presented.

The DAPVE model is adopted from the work of the scholars Armenakis, Harris, and Field¹³ as a prescriptive framework for conveying an organizational change message to

employees. Their research produced a typology of change attitudes that, when addressed effectively, has reduced resistance and increased buy-in among change recipients.¹⁴ The DAPVE framework is practically useful because it provides a prescriptive strategy for change as well as an evaluative tool to estimate success during implementation.

Each dimension of the DAPVE can be characterized as a question the employee asks of themselves upon notification of a specific change initiative. *Discrepancy*, also conceptualized recently by Kotter as a “sense of urgency,”¹⁵ addresses why the organization must change. For example, discrepancy describes the reflexive introspective query “is there anything wrong with the way we are currently doing things?”¹⁶ *Appropriateness* is the concurrence that the proposed solution to the discrepancy is the correct solution. Often the change recipient will also ask “Is this change the appropriate way to fix what is wrong?”¹⁷ *Principle support* is the belief that both formal and informal leaders within the organization support the change. It refers to the employee’s belief that the program has the long-term support of senior management, and is not just another “program of the month.”¹⁸ *Valence* is the perceived personal benefit arising from the organizational change. In other words, “are my personal consequences of adopting this change positive or negative?” Lastly, *efficacy* is how the organization will successfully implement the change. Change recipients must believe that they can successfully accomplish the work required by the change. No matter how appropriate the change is, if the change recipients do not believe they can accomplish what is required, they are highly unlikely to attempt to change.¹⁹ This DAPVE model provides a lens with which to view cognitive and emotional change readiness at the individual level.

Change is Change

"Company cultures are like country cultures. Never try to change one. Try, instead, to work with what you've got."

- Peter Drucker, 20th century American social ecologist²⁰

In the reality of today's globally competitive business environment it is clear that an organization's ability to implement planned change is a requisite for success, if not survival.²¹ Consequently, organizational leaders must determine appropriate methods to develop, introduce, and institutionalize planned change. This task can appear daunting. Most change efforts start out well but fail because leaders do not anticipate internal resistance.²² Moreover, accumulated failed changes often create cynicism among members; creating a cycle wherein subsequent change efforts become more and more difficult to implement.²³

Scholars and practitioners have found change-recipients' attitudes toward a planned change is critical to successfully implementing the change. Furthermore, findings in the change and development literature indicate that properly structured leadership-led communication to employees helps to overcome employee uneasiness and tension associated with organizational change.²⁴ This attitudinal shift, recognized as readiness for change, increases the probability of successful change implementation.²⁵ Specifically, the DAPVE framework²⁶ is a theoretically-grounded and empirically-supported leadership message model that provides an effective barometer of readiness for change in the organization.²⁷ Analyzing change recipient feedback through the lens of this framework enables change agents to focus communication and substantive efforts on the components needing the most attention. For example, if change recipients are convinced there is a *discrepancy* in the current situation--that is, the current situation is untenable--but are not sure that the change being proposed will correct the problem,

then leadership should focus the messaging effort on the *appropriateness* facet of the DAPVE framework.

While cultural attitudes toward change vary, there exists a natural human inclination to resist change.²⁸ The attitudes toward change are born of emotional and cognitive processes. How we feel and what we think of a focal change forms our behavior. Not surprisingly, when strong feelings are evoked, they tend to heavily influence, or in some cases override logical thought processes. In the battle for hearts and minds, the heart is a more lucrative target. This is important to understand because the change message is constructed so as to persuade a target audience. We see evidence of a misalignment between communicator and target in everyday life. Counselors describing the communication gap between teenagers and adults note that adults tend to speak in terms of *think*, while teens express in terms of *feel*.²⁹ It is difficult to reach a mutually beneficial conclusion while operating on separate planes; as Supreme Allied Commander Europe Admiral Stavridis posited in his treatise on strategic communication, that effective communication must be “delivered to the right audience in the precise way.”³⁰

Cross-cultural Battle for Perceptions

“If I were grading I would probably say we probably deserve a “D” or a “D-plus” as a country as to how well we are doing in the battle of ideas.”

-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, 27 March 2006³¹

In their article, *Massing Effects in the Information Domain*, former commander of III Corps during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Lieutenant General Metz and his co-authors analyzed two operations during Iraqi Freedom and found that failure and success in the respective cases hinged on the IO effort.³² They credit the introduction of the concept of the “IO threshold” as critical to the success of Operation Al-Fajr. Metz and his co-authors describe the IO threshold as the “point at which enemy information-based operations (aimed at international, regional, and

local media coverage) begins to undermine the Coalition force's ability to conduct unconstrained combat operations.”³³ The intent for coalition forces is to remain *below* the IO threshold so that they can execute effective military operations. During pre-mission planning for Operation Al-Fajr, much attention was given to raising the IO threshold through IO shaping operations, senior leader engagements, and military and public diplomacy. The additional maneuver room created by raising the baseline IO threshold through trust-building communications and practices prior to the mission was decisive in victory at Al-Fajr.³⁴

There is an overall belief that the U.S. lacks the requisite skills, resources, and guidance to synchronize IO in order produce concrete effects on the battlefield.³⁵ In fact, we have been largely unsuccessful in getting inside the enemy's IO loop and reacting with effective messaging during real-time operations and tactical events. To be fair, speed is hampered where verifiability of information and truth in reporting are necessary; our enemy is unencumbered in this regard. Thus our mandate is to build an environment where the IO ceiling is sufficiently high so as to allow the military operations necessary for victory. This environment will also serve to provide a context when the unexpected occurs and we find ourselves in a reactionary situation, such as answering accusations of causing civilian deaths. This concern is ever more poignant as our strategy in Afghanistan as shifted to "population protection.”³⁶

Of course, while prosecuting a battle for perception, the potential for mistakes is not limited to the tactical or operational levels. Infamous examples range from President Bush's inexplicable use of the word “crusade”³⁷ to describe the war on terrorism, to then Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes' well-intentioned, albeit offensive, comments to a group of Saudi women discussing the right to drive in their own country.³⁸ Undersecretary Hughes' incident, described below, is illustrative in that given a lack of empathy we often project our own

values. Certainly this is not the first time that cross-cultural sensitivity has been identified as a necessity for effective communication; nonetheless, mistakes abound.

While on a ‘listening tour’ to Saudi Arabia in 2005, Undersecretary Hughes described her love for driving, a privilege that Saudi women do not enjoy, to a large group of Saudi women.³⁹ According to at least one report, when it came time for questions from the women, two things became clear: (a) These students didn't find Hughes' status as a mom particularly relevant; and (b) they resented being portrayed as victims. Student after student stepped to the microphones in the hall. Peering out from behind their abayas, they denounced the portrayal in the American news media of Saudi women as powerless and abused. “We are not oppressed. We are not prisoners in our own homes,” said one student. “We are all pretty happy.”⁴⁰ She demanded to know why Americans have such a negative view of the way Saudi women are treated. Perhaps, Hughes had thought that prefacing her comments with the following would soothe her listeners:

Now I understand that your culture and traditions here in Saudi Arabia are very different so I don't think we should try to impose from outside an outcome for you all. But I do think we can encourage greater participation, encourage opportunities like this for women in Saudi Arabia to speak up and speak your minds.⁴¹

It seems the comments had quite the opposite effect; judging from the audience's reaction, their inference was that Secretary Hughes did not comprehend their circumstance accurately. Indeed, it seems they saw little reason to change their current circumstance. You may recall that *discrepancy* is described as a belief by change recipients that the current situation is untenable, and needs to change, is a necessary condition to implement change. Creating this perceived need for change is recognized in the organizational change literature as the most difficult step in implementing change. The DAPVE model, born of transformational change

efforts in the corporate world, provides a typology by which each step of the change effort may be implemented and assessed.

The responsibility for effective communication lies with the sender. Additionally, those *receivers* affected by change will make their decisions in a context of myriad considerations, both explicit and subconscious. In the end however, the decision to accept, reject, embrace, or resist change is made at the individual level. The DAPVE model provides a lens with which to view cognitive and emotional change readiness at the individual level. Scholarly research in organizational change indicates that the five precursors in the DAPVE framework determine the degree of buy-in by organizational change recipients.⁴² In addition to gauging change commitment among change recipients, knowledge of these precursors can be used to assess deficiencies in specific beliefs that may adversely impact the success of an organizational change, as well as to plan and execute actions to enhance buy-in among change recipients. While measuring buy-in and deficiencies is useful, necessary, and certainly deserves attention in the context of COIN, the present research focuses on the utility of the DAPVE framework to effectively plan and execute communication actions. Indeed, as a tool for persuasive communication, the DAPVE has proven effective in the corporate world and provides a framework for narrative development consistent with COIN objectives.

The commonality of emotions and cognitions between boardroom and the battlefield that form the change recipient's attitude is evident in the recognition of COIN as a war in which you "must win and keep the support of the people."⁴³ Frank Kitson, a British military officer whose writings guided British operations in Northern Ireland, posited that the "characteristic that distinguishes campaigns of insurgency from other forms of war is that they are primarily concerned with the struggle for men's minds."⁴⁴ It only seems sensible then that we should

examine a mechanism by which influence is gained--namely persuasive communication in the rich literature of organizational change--to fight the war in Afghanistan.

Implementing the DAPVE Framework

“The information environment is a critical dimension of such internal wars, and insurgents attempt to shape it to their advantage.”

-FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*⁴⁵

The importance of consistent objectives and effective messaging for strategic communication is not lost on the United States Government. Guidance from the Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Policy Coordinating Committee outlines strategic objectives and broadly describes the ways by which to achieve them. For example, the second of three objectives states, “With our partners, we seek to isolate and marginalize violent extremists who threaten the freedom and peace sought by civilized people of every nation, culture, and faith.”⁴⁶ One of the five methods given to achieve this goal is by “actively engaging Muslim communities and amplifying mainstream Muslim voices.”⁴⁷ These broad national-level ends and ways, if executed successfully, support COIN through the bolstering of political will and public opinion.

Regarding communication, *reception* and *perception* are everything. A dialogue is necessary before the development of a narrative. Colonel William Darley, Director of Strategic Communications at the Combined Arms Center at Ft. Leavenworth Kansas, in his article *The Missing Communication of U.S. Strategic Communications*,⁴⁸ places the blame for failed U.S. strategic communications on the national-level inability to agree on what the United States wishes to convey. Moreover, strategic communication should be aligned and coordinated. Given the viral nature of the internet, twitter, and a host of social networking devices, this looks undoable. That is, if it looks boring, *they* (the intended audience) may not read it owing to the

competition for attention and infotainment aspect. There may be a big difference between telling the audience what you think they need to know, versus what they want to know. Empathy correctly guides the message to what the audience needs to know, the way they want to hear it. After all, the effectiveness of a change message lies in the eye of the beholder. An alternative to a top-down approach to message generation,⁴⁹ is to build a bottom-up, or tactical message, while simultaneously countering the insurgent message at the operational level. As U.S. Congressman Thomas (Tip) O’Neil, longtime Speaker of the House famously observed, “all politics is local.”⁵⁰ Similarly, bottom-up implementation of the message framework requires that each component of the DAPVE be considered at the tactical, or local, level. Proper employment of the DAPVE can serve as a forcing function to increase our understanding of the target audience, thereby increasing the effectiveness of our message.

For example, when an ISAF unit working in a village engages villagers and their leaders, the unit members could use the DAPVE as a message development tool. Working through each component of the framework and understanding the villagers’ concerns, as revealed in the derived messages, would enable the unit to focus its efforts on specific shortfalls. In this instance, if, while assessing *discrepancy*, the unit determined that villagers did not perceive a need to change, then persuasive efforts should be undertaken to convey the problems with the existing circumstance. In this example, the message should seek to convey to villagers that absent their support for ISAF efforts, the Taliban will gain power and rule. Alternatively, if the villagers already understood the need for a change, they would then consider which change was appropriate to their circumstances. Of course, we would hope that the villagers preferred the change promoted by the ISAF unit, rather than the Taliban, and messaging efforts would focus on making the former choice as attractive as possible. Table 1 depicts a notional tactical-level

change message example. Undoubtedly, the salient concerns will vary according by villages, regions, and nationalities. In fact, as discussed previously, it is worth remembering that needs differ at the individual level.

Table 1. Notional DAPVE Message Components at the Local Level

Component	Villager Questions	DAPVE Answer
Discrepancy	Why should I support ISAF and the Afghan forces?	Future of your village is in doubt
Appropriateness	How does this operation fix what is broken?	Safety and Security without Taliban control
Principal support	Is this just the latest change? Is it just temporary?	ISAF and the Afghan forces will stay until you want us out
Valence	What's in it for me?	A safe and secure environment for you, your family, and your village
Efficacy	Can I do this? Can my village do this?	We will rebuild your school and provide you long-term security assistance

Recognizing that values cannot be transferred from sender to receiver is critical for effective communication.⁵¹ Yet, those seeking to influence others frequently make the assumption that their values and meanings are shared with the receiver. Assessment techniques should include focus groups, polling, surveys, and interviews. Relationships are critical in high-context societies. During discussions, comments can be noted and sorted into the DAPVE model. This analysis can then be fed into the DAPVE message to determine the correct answers. It bears repeating: the correct answers are the ones that address the change recipient concerns. The DAPVE is a living document. Over time, or across locations, as concerns shift, the message content is modified to remain relevant addressing the needs of the change recipient. Thus, every effort must be made to gain trust among the locals and actively listen to feedback.

The insurgents in Afghanistan have provided ammunition for the information war. They repeatedly perform barbaric acts on those that they consider tools of the U.S.⁵² Al Qaeda have

tortured and graphically mutilated “Western sympathizers” holding positions such as hair dressers and policemen. While this intimidation may directly influence behaviors, when framed correctly they may influence attitudes toward supporting change. Al Qaeda also uses non-violent persuasion techniques. Even ISAF’s simplest decent acts, such as providing food for the hungry, are countered by Al Qaeda warnings to the villagers that the food is poisoned. Thus, the population has very good reasons not to change. A concerted effort will be required to overcome this kind of resistance to change.

A top-down (theater-level) DAPVE message should be built concurrent with the bottom-up message. Assessing the target audience from the strategic level as well as the competing message from the insurgents would enable a message with broad appeal. An analysis of Al-Qaeda’s public diplomacy campaign could be used as a starting point. A 2003 Rand survey revealed five themes that resonated with much of the world’s Muslim community:⁵³

- a) The U.S. is wholly responsible for the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the deaths of thousands of innocent Palestinians
- b) U.S. sanctions following the Gulf War have killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians
- c) The U.S. supports corrupt Arab regimes throughout the Middle East
- d) The U.S. troop presence on the Arab peninsula is a sacrilege
- e) The U.S. and other Western ‘crusader’ nations have waged barbaric wars on Muslim nations while Muslims have been wholly peaceable.

Counter points should be articulated, consistent with the DAPVE framework, to address these themes. Values-level appeals will attract the population of interest, but that is only attained if conveyed with the proper perspective. Thus, the participation of trusted members of the

population should be used to develop the change message.⁵⁴ Understanding the change recipient's world view, that is the assumptions they make about reality, is critical to appreciating their perspective regarding the message the change agents wish to convey.⁵⁵ The operational level message should be compared to the aggregate of tactical messages on a regular basis. Undoubtedly, inconsistencies will exist. However, using the framework the contradictions can be located among the DAPVE components, analyzed, and addressed more effectively.

Conclusion

While the counter-insurgency battlefield and the innovative corporate firm are seemingly distal environments, they share a preeminent characteristic: success in either realm depends on effective communication with a target audience. Fighting the "Long War" of insurgency requires the influencing of the hearts and minds of affected individuals. In this battle for ideas, we must develop weapons that target the enemy's center of gravity. The DAPVE framework provides a template to enable the development of a change message that has increased organizational change readiness among employees in the corporate world.⁵⁶ The prescriptive and adaptable nature of this framework allows for the nesting of the message content across the strategic, operational, and tactical spectrum. Hopefully this manuscript can serve as a starting point from which further development and application will assist us in winning the critical strategic communication battle in Afghanistan.

Notes

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

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